



1973

The divided consciousness in Charles Dickens' *Hard times*

Earl Paul Seymour
University of the Pacific

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/uop_etds



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Seymour, Earl Paul. (1973). *The divided consciousness in Charles Dickens' Hard times*. University of the Pacific, Thesis. https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/uop_etds/1815

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of the Pacific Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact mgibney@pacific.edu.

THE DIVIDED CONSCIOUSNESS IN
CHARLES DICKENS' HARD TIMES

An Essay
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
University of the Pacific

in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Arts

by
Earl Paul Seymour

May 1973

This essay, written and submitted by

EARL PAUL SEYMOUR,

is approved for recommendation to the Committee on
Graduate Studies, University of the Pacific.

Department Chairman or Dean:

John Seaman

Essay Committee:

Alane M. Borden, Chairman

Walter L. McCall

Robert Houghton

Dated

5-11-73

THE DIVIDED CONSCIOUSNESS IN
CHARLES DICKENS' HARD TIMES

Hard Times has been praised for its humanistic intentions, criticized for its deplorable execution, and laid to rest in those grounds reserved for the lesser creations of great authors. David M. Hirsch observes that Dickens "does not succeed in converting his very commendable moral intentions into first-rate fiction."¹ John Holloway makes a similar point: Hard Times "operated (for all its obvious common sense and its genuine value) at a relatively shallow level of consciousness."² If Hard Times were, as one critic has suggested, "one of (Dickens') dullest and least successful works," interment would indeed be an act of kindness.³ If, however, the fault lies less with Hard Times than with the manner in which it has been regarded, what is called for is not a premature act of literary euthanasia, but a new look at the work itself. Previously read and judged in comparison with Dickens' other novels, Hard Times has not, to put it gently, fared very well. Its characters seem unbelievable in their exaggerated traits of goodness and evil, its plot wooden and mechanical, and its

moral vision and artistic resolution less than satisfying. Other critics make the same points: Monroe Engel⁴ and Raymond Williams.⁵

However, Northrop Frye suggested some time ago that a "more relative and Copernican view must take the place" of the Ptolemaic novel-centered view of prose fiction," and Hard Times' critical fate is a case in point of what happens when a Ptolemaic system, as it were, is imposed upon a work operating in accordance with different laws.⁶ Our understanding and appreciation of Hard Times are diminished if we ask of it the same things we ask, for example, of Great Expectations. Great Expectations is undoubtedly one of Dickens' finest novels; Hard Times, on the other hand, is not a novel, but a romance and operates according to inherently different laws. But although it is a romance, Hard Times is at the same time unique as a romance for several reasons: first, one of its major themes is, in fact, the death of romance; and secondly, there is internal evidence, especially in the character of Stephen Blackpool, of Dickens' attempts to remain within the novel tradition and its nineteenth-century brand of social realism. When Dickens finally does depart from the novel form, he neither falsifies nor simplifies an originally sound idea, but yields instead to a truer vision that thwarts his attempts to deny it.

Hard Times operates primarily within psychological rather than sociological categories and the issues it raises are directed less to the question of how man can create a more generous and humane society than to the question of whether society is not by definition corrupt and inhumane. The nature of the questions Hard Times raises makes it an original work, one whose originality is seen most clearly when Dickens tries to come to terms with a question implicit throughout it--namely, what must man do to be saved. It is in his attempt to cope with this question that Dickens moves toward the romance, since it, for reasons suggested by Northrop Frye, offered him a particular creative freedom the novel form could not have provided. As Frye observes:

The essential difference between novel and romance lies in the conception of characterization. The romancer does not attempt to create "real people" so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes....that is why the romance so often radiates a glow of subjective intensity that the novel lacks, and why a suggestion of allegory is constantly creeping in around its fringes. Certain elements of character are released in the romance which make it naturally a more revolutionary form than the novel.

What I shall do in this paper is apply Frye's concept of romance to Hard Times, i.e. Frye's defining romance as a device for using archetypes. The novel, as Frye sees it, is a vehicle whereby "realism" or life-like representation is applied. Hard Times contains "stylized

figures" which thematically and formalistically support the dehumanization concept Dickens is portraying. Thus Dickens turned, as it were, toward a potentially revolutionary form within which to accommodate what is in many ways his most original piece of writing.

In order to understand Hard Times more fully, however, we need to go back to an essay published four months prior to the time Dickens began working on Hard Times, for in it Dickens presents the essential germs of that vision of man's psychic and imaginative life he was later to dramatize, develop, and enrich in Hard Times. Two months after completing Bleak House, Dickens published in Household Words a short essay, "Frauds on the Fairies," in which he attacked George Cruikshank's editorial bowdlerizing of a volume of fairy tales. The essay is important, however, not for what it reveals either about Cruikshank or fairy tales per se, but for what it reveals about Dickens' own attitudes toward the role of art in man's life. His "very great tenderness for the fairy literature of our childhood" arises from the capacity of such literature "to keep us, in some sense, ever young, by preserving through our worldly ways one slender track not overgrown with weeds, where we may walk with children, sharing their delights." The small imaginative plot, the "fairy flower garden," is threatened by the intrusion of the adult consciousness, the "Whole Hog of unwieldy dimensions," which can

destroy the joy or "delight" that energizes the poetic imagination. Once this imaginative power is lost, man is isolated from his past; and the fragmenting and dehumanizing process Dickens sees inherent in industrial civilization is accelerated. The essay's language seems excessive in places until one realizes that Dickens is concerned with much more than merely the bowdlerizing of a single edition of fairy tales. When Dickens writes, for example, that "it is a matter of grave importance [italics mine], that fairy tales should be respected," he means precisely what he says; for in them he finds not only a literary tradition, but an answer to the question of how man is to be saved.

The fairy tale's "grave importance" lies in its capacity to act as a mediating force between man and the phenomenal world and in its ability to transform substantively that relationship. By reuniting man to his past, the fairy tale makes it possible for him to become transfigured by the artistic and imaginative power created by the emotions of joy and wonder. Conversely, isolation from the past and its childhood emotions results in the fate of a Josiah Bounderby, a man committed to the ethos of death and trapped within a diseased imagination. While in Pegasus' Arms, an inn significantly named after the symbol of the poetic imagination, Bounderby is warned by one of the circus people to "give it [his philosophy] mouth in your own

own building...because this [the inn] isn't a strong building, and too much of you might bring it down!" (I,vi,25).⁹ The Hog has only the power to destroy the flower garden; the garden, on the other hand, has the power to save the Hog from destroying itself. But if the imaginative power is to be redemptive, it must be nonuseful: it must resist compromise with the world of utility. "To preserve [the fairy tales] in their usefulness," Dickens writes, "they must be as much preserved in their simplicity, and purity, and innocent extravagance, as if they were actual fact."¹⁰

But in spite of its occasional flashes of insight, "Frauds on the Fairies" is by no means a philosophical essay. Its importance lies in the fact that the issues it raises show up again four months later in Hard Times, some of them intact and some of them seriously modified. One of the most serious modifications is the way in which Dickens' attitude toward the relationship between art and society changes. In the essay, Dickens views the "fairy flower garden" and the "whole Hog" as uniquely different but not necessarily mutually exclusive, and seems to suggest that man can keep them separate but still maintain a dual allegiance to each. Hard Times, too, seems to end on the note of a similar dual allegiance--Louisa Gradgrind as a teller of tales within the heart of Coketown--but the similarity is more apparent than real. "Frauds on the Fairies" can hold out hope because Dickens can still

believe in society's ability to accommodate those human values embodied in fairy tale literature; in Hard Times, on the other hand, Dickens becomes more strident as he realizes the futility inherent in such a hope. Hard Times moves away from the earlier essay in that it finally denies and belies Dickens' attempts to suggest a possible amelioration of the conflicts within it.

Hard Times' world is a world of romance gone mad. The fairy tale elements are present--castles, fairy palaces, serpents, giants, and dragons--but they have become parodies of an earlier imaginative world whose qualities they perversely mock. Its landscape, like the landscape of romance, is one of the mind, an external symbol of the psychic condition of its inhabitants. In this case, it is a death mask which serves to remind us of man's capacity to create a world conducive only to his own death and destruction, thus Coketown becomes the mental landscape of the novel:

[Coketown] was a town of red brick or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black, like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness (I,v,17).

Self-contained and virtually autonomous, it allows for little movement beyond it. Few of its citizens depart, even fewer enter. Driven away because he insisted on being a man as well as a "hand," Stephen Blackpool was returning when death intervened between him and his destination. James Harthouse, presented as a parody of the archetypal tempter, Lucifer, "trimmed, smoothed, and varnished, according to the mode...awearied of vice, and awearied of virtue" (II,viii,137), is the only major character not affiliated with the circus to enter Coketown from the outside; but even he carries with him a card of introduction from Tom Gradgrind, Sr., one of Coketown's most illustrious citizens. Tom Gradgrind, Jr., is virtually dead before he escapes from Coketown on a voyage during which he will complete his death. He was, we read, "horribly fevered, bit his nails down to the quick, spoke in a hard rattling voice, and with lips that were black and burntup" (III,iv,193).

Similarly, the nonhuman elements in Coketown are isolated from external forces and powers. Threatened by the natural forces of life, Coketown assures itself of survival by moving toward a deathlike stasis. Its success is almost complete, but the city still finds antagonists in the powers of the sun and rain. The sun, however, is vanquished by Coketown: appearing for only one-half hour each day, "eternally in eclipse,

through a medium of smoked glass" (II,vi,126), it is unable to fight off those high chimneys which conceal it by "puffing out poisonous volumes" of smoke and gas. Coketown's final success is seen in the conversion of its major antagonist to its cause:

The sun itself, however, beneficent generally, was less kind to Coketown than hard frost, and rarely looked intently into any of the closer regions without engendering more death than life. So does the eye of Heaven itself become an evil eye, when incapable or sordid hands are interposed between it and the things it looks upon to bless (II,i,85).

Against the power of the rain, the forces of Coketown are less triumphant: "the rain fell, and the Smoke-serpents, submissive to the curse of all that tribe, trailed themselves upon the earth" (I,xi,53). But since the powers of death have already gained control of Coketown's inhabitants, the city's unnatural forces can tolerate the minor threats posed by nature without fearing any major defeat. Coketown's factories and machines continually reassert their power by diminishing the power of life. The energy they represent is a constant factor; it can be apportioned out in equal or unequal degrees, but it can be neither increased nor decreased. By making use of this natural law in an otherwise unnatural environment, Coketown has created a domain in which human energy comes, in turn, heavily energized and anthropomorphized.

The atmosphere of those Fairy palaces was like the breath of the simoon: and their inhabitants, wasting with heat, toiled languidly in the desert. But no temperature made the melancholy mad elephants [the steam engines] more mad or more sane (II,1,85).

Throughout the work, we discover within the larger strata of Coketown's society the operation of psychological principles which, in turn, manifest themselves in a civilization that at once reflects and determines their shape. It is in this respect that Hard Times depicts repression on two planes, corresponding to the levels Herbert Marcuse has defined as the growth of the repressed individual and the growth of repressive civilization.¹¹ Consequently, it is impossible to speak of Hard Times' outer world without simultaneously speaking of the inner world of its inhabitants, for Coketown is but the collective symbol of a people reduced to deadness and kept alive only to perpetuate this deadness.

[Coketown] was inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next (I,v,17).

Having created an environment that mirrors their own deadness and assures its continuity, Coketown's citizens are appropriately described by Dickens as automatons engaged in the repetition of meaningless acts within

a world for which time no longer offers the possibility of growth and change. Coketown strangles all manifestations of sexuality and imagination--each an attribute of Eros or life--and thereby weakens the only power that can oppose Thanatos, or death. Finally emerging as a pattern within Hard Times is a cycle whose implications are so far-reaching that even Freud, who was later to come across it, describes it with trepidation:

namely, the more energy the citizens of Coketown expend upon industrialization (read "civilization"), the less energy they have to slow down their own ever-accelerating momentum toward death. Love (Eros, imagination, sexuality) alone can redeem man; yet love is the very thing civilization must repress if it is to survive. As Freud puts it:

In the course of development [of civilization] the relation of love to civilization loses its ambiguity. On the one hand love comes into opposition to the interests of civilization; on the other, civilization threatens love with substantial restrictions.¹²

The relation of Hard Times' plot to Freud's major thesis here becomes apparent if, in the above passage, we substitute "Stephen Blackpool" for "love" and "Boulderby" for "civilization." When we realize that Freud's statement both defines and describes one of Hard Times' major conflicts, that allegory in romance spoken of earlier by Frye begins to assume in Hard Times' case an ominous shape.

It is the appearance of this cycle that distinguishes

Hard Times from Dickens' Bleak House. Bleak House can be read in part as Dickens' attempt to define and hopefully to alleviate particular social ills; Hard Times, on the other hand, dramatizes the futility of such an attempt. In his introduction to an edition of Hard Times, George Bernard Shaw wrote of this essential difference:

This [Hard Times] is Karl Marx, Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris, Carpenter, rising up against civilization itself as against a disease, and declaring that it is not our disorder but our order that is horrible; that it is not our criminals but our magnates that are robbing and murdering us; and that it is not merely Tom All Alone's that must be demolished and abolished, pulled down,¹³ rooted up...but our entire social system.

As Shaw suggests, Dickens previously sought to expose the "sins and wickednesses and follies of a great civilization"; but in Hard Times he realized that "until Society is reformed, no man can reform himself." Once this realization occurred, Dickens' bonds with nineteenth-century humanism are weakened to such an extent that a final severance seems inevitable. But for a man whose previous intellectual ties with this humanistic tradition were so strong, neither the realization nor the break could come easily.

The tension created in Hard Times by Dickens' moving away from this tradition is seen most clearly in the figure of Stephen Blackpool. Stephen's death marks the shift of power within Hard Times from a tradition that

looked toward love and compassion as effectual powers of social change to Dickens' private vision of civilization per se as corrupt. Dickens creates in Stephen Blackpool a character who almost alone in Hard Times embodies the struggle of an individual against a dehumanizing society and then Dickens can find nothing to do with him but kill him. Stephen's two major conflicts--with his wife and with Bounderby--are but two sides of the same coin, and his failure to solve either suggests the powerlessness of love in modern civilization. For his effort to free himself from the dead, and deadening, relationship with his wife is thwarted by the same powers that forbade Stephen from asserting his individuality, punished him when he did so, and ultimately created circumstances that precipitated his death. Hard Times' critics have so readily given their assent to Ruskin's description of Stephen, "a dramatic perfection, instead of a characteristic example of an honest workman," that they failed to observe that even Stephen does not escape Coketown's blight.¹⁴ Coketown is characterized by aggression--man against nature, nature against man, man against man, and man against himself--and Stephen, too, participates in it. The pain arising from the first conflict results in an outward aggression (the barely averted murder of his wife), while the second leads to an

inward aggression (his passive response to the inequities leveled against him and his almost active acceptance of death when it finally comes).

The difficulty that Dickens confronts in his characterizations of Stephen is not due to his falling back on easy or simplistic resolutions, but his moving into a different realm of experience. Stephen's protestations to Bounderby that love, kindness, humility, and patience could alone unite the rich and the poor gain their stridency from Dickens' urgent need to believe in what Stephen says. But behind these protestations is Stephen's and, by inference, Dickens' recognition that only death could end Stephen's problems. Seeing in this world neither clarity nor fulfillment--"Ah, Rachael, aw a muddle! Fro' first to last, a muddle"--Stephen quite early in the work seems to intuit the inadequacy of such virtues in alleviating social conditions and consequently looks for a final reconciliation between his dreams and reality in the world beyond.

And so I will try t'look t' th' time, and
so I will try t'trust t' th' time, when
thou [Rachael] and me at last shall walk
together far awa', beyond the deep gulf,
in th' country where thy little sister
is (I,xiii,69).

When Stephen does die, his death scene appears pathetic at best, but within it we find evidence of the tension created by Dickens' characterization of Stephen.

Stephen's death scene represents, as it were, a pyrrhic

victory for Dickens' public voice in that it not only belies the controlling vision, but comes precariously close to validating Marx's famous maxim, "Religion is the opiate of the people." The unwillingness on Dickens' part to follow the implications of Stephen's death through to the end is seen when he brings forth a resolution---namely, heavenly compensation for earthly suffering---similar to the one offered by a bulk of Evangelical literature written in defense of the status quo. But in spite of his attempts to soften the impact of Stephen's death, Dickens still shows us that in this world there is little room for love, goodness, and humility, and that the God of the poor is not much help to them while they are alive.

When viewed in this context, Dickens' comment that "I have done what I hope is a good thing with Stephen, taking his story as a whole," becomes, as its tone suggests, ambivalently correct.¹⁵ In two senses, what he does with Stephen is good. First, Hard Times demands Stephen's death since the conflict he embodies is incapable of any other resolution. The inclusion of a penitent industrialist would have been out of place and would have falsified Dickens' vision in this work. Secondly, Stephen's death seems to suggest that in the nightmare world of Coketown, suffering does in fact end with death. And in a world where the mere attempt

to assert one's individuality evokes such disastrous consequences, it is perhaps optimistic to assert that one can still die a human death. It is in this respect that Hard Times comes closest to Frye's sixth phase of satire, a vision that "differs from a pure inferno mainly in the fact that in human experience suffering has an end in death."¹⁶ In a profounder sense, however, what Dickens does do with Stephen is anything but good. He creates a good and gentle man, bestows upon him the task of fighting, armed only with individual goodness, an inhuman social system, and then Dickens cannot find a way to keep him alive. Stephen's literal death is demanded by his earlier expulsion from Coketown. His guilt or innocence in the robbery is irrelevant; even if he had been exonerated of the crime, the best Stephen could have hoped for would have been readmission to a society which still would have denied him his freedom and individuality.

Stephen Blackpool can be viewed on another level as the proletarian hero of a work whose implications finally become too large for him to carry. As a proletarian hero, Stephen possesses the characteristics of the pastoral hero as well: he is innocent and uneducated, but endowed with common sense and a rustic eloquence. As William Empson points out, both pastoral and proletarian art "attempt to reconcile some conflict

between the parts of a society"--in Hard Times, between employer (Bounderby) and employee (Stephen Blackpool)--and depend upon the individual's ability to transcend artificial social gulfs for this reconciliation.¹⁷ The shepherd is either a real aristocrat in disguise or is gifted with an aristocratic soul; the worker is able to reach the employer on human and thus genuine terms:

Stephen's last major confrontation with Bounderby (II,v) is a classic example of such an attempt. In so far as both assume the possibility of such a breakthrough, they are optimistic; and, in part, their optimism depends upon the absence of any final restraint of man's capacity to effect such change. But it is precisely toward this final restraint that the dialectic established within Hard Times seems to point. Hard Times moves primarily within psychological rather than social categories and ultimately suggests a dialectic more akin to the life-death axis of Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents than to the employer-employee axis of proletarian art. The battle waged in Hard Times is not between labor and capital, but between Eros and Thanatos and, consequently, the possibility of Stephen's effecting meaningful change is denied. Stephen Blackpool remains an anomaly in Hard Times, both for Bounderby, the employer who must fire him, and for Dickens, the artist who must kill him.

The creation of Stephen Blackpool, however, was but

one of the problems Hard Times posed for Dickens. Dickens' letters attest to the fact that the work was in many ways an exceptionally difficult piece for him to write, primarily because, as Dickens describes it, of its lack of that "elbow room" his previous fiction had provided. It is, however, hard to accept this reason as the sole cause. By 1854 Dickens was an experienced novelist and journalist and had undoubtedly confronted the "difficulty of space" before. Also, the language used by Dickens to describe the agony involved in writing Hard Times would suggest that the trouble was located deeper than Dickens' own diagnosis implies. Dickens most likely did find it tasking to work on a cameo when he had been used to working on murals, but another reason for his difficulty lies, I think, in the dual directions he found his creative energies moving: toward the book his dedication of Hard Times to Carlyle suggests he wanted to write, and toward the book he was in fact writing. His own statements about Hard Times, his condition of mind (and body) when he completed it, and the difficulties within the piece itself all suggest that Hard Times became for Dickens much more than a dramatized version of the maxim, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

What gives Hard Times its power is not its plausibility, but rather the presence within it of those

qualities of romance Frye speaks of: the expansion of "stylized figures" into "psychological archetypes," and the release of those "certain elements of character" which make the romance "naturally a more revolutionary form than the novel."¹⁸ Dickens' Hard Times attacks nothing less than the reality principle itself.

Those characters in Hard Times who sustain Dickens' vision do so by first violating our usual expectations of how people act, and then carrying us to the truths that lie in front of our expectations. Bounderby and Louisa Gradgrind are woven together by a psychic condition that finds its poetic logic in the imagery of fire and enclosure. Fire is alluded to throughout: the steam engines, the heat that bakes the city and its citizens, Tom Gradgrind, Jr., horribly fevered with lips "black and burnt up," and the fireplace in front of which his sister sits. The imagery of enclosure is equally pervasive: the self-contained, autonomous world of Coketown itself, its walls and narrow streets, its castles, banks, palaces, mine shafts, factories, coalpits, and again Louisa Gradgrind's fireplace. This poetic logic is in turn reinforced by Dickens' narrative logic, episodes and authorial observations. Two comments in particular from the work's narrative fiber make it clear how Dickens, prefiguring twentieth-century studies of fire imagery such as Freud's study of the Promethean myth and

Bachelard's The Psychoanalysis of Fire¹⁹ lands upon highly effective symbols to contain and illuminate the work's controlling theme: the consequences of the repression of man's sexuality and imagination. The first comment, Dickens' observation that the ghost of a strangled imagination manifests itself in the form of groveling sensualities (II,iii,101), reveals Bounderby with a clarity that neither poetic nor narrative logic could have individually achieved. The second, "all closely imprisoned forces rend and destroy," allows us to see Louisa Gradgrind---her relationship to her brother and to Bounderby and her meditations before the fireplace---as a total character. Two of the major life-forces of Eros, sexuality (Dickens' "closely imprisoned forces") and imagination (his "strangled imagination"), are repressed, and their repression gives rise to a sickness whose cure lies not in the eradication of society's ills, but in the eradication of society itself.

In many respects Bounderby embodies that paradox that goes by the name of civilization. He is at once both its victim and its perpetrator. Grossly sensual, he is also an archetype of impotence; intensely contemptuous of anything bordering on the imaginative, he has erected his life upon a huge fiction; a blatantly aggressive and hard-nosed industrialist, he remains throughout a man-child, finding in Mrs. Sparsit the mother he has disavowed.

and the mistress he cannot have. He created his life around the middle class's favorite myth pattern--the hero's rise from obscurity and poverty by means of enterprise, ingenuity, and sacrifice, only to become one of literature's oldest stock figures of ridicule, the man bullied or dominated by women. In describing the sexual nature of Bounderby's frustration, Dickens remains sufficiently allusive to satisfy the publishing mores of Victorian England while at the same time leaving us with few doubts as to how we are to read his character. For example, the first time we meet Bounderby we confront:

a man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins in his temples, and such a strained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open...a man with a pervading appearance on him of being inflated like a balloon, and ready to start (I,iv,11).

Just after Louisa Gradgrind leaves him, following a brief and unconsummated marriage, the

blustrous Bounderby crimsoned and swelled to such an extent...that he seemed to be, and probably was, on the brink of a fit. With his very ears a bright purple shot with crimson, he pent up his indignation (III,iii,183).

Dickens' message is clear enough.

Dickens' "Frauds on the Fairies" provides additional insight into the relationship between Bounderby's psychic condition, externalized in his physiognomy, and his fiction about his past. In it, Dickens suggests, as I have mentioned, that man's remembrance of his childhood

literature allows him to "walk with children" and to share the child's joy in being part of the natural world. This joy, because it increases the strength of Eros, is a potentially liberating power; but in order to participate in it, man must deny those forces pressuring him into the abandonment of his childhood values and affirm the pleasure principle, the controlling force of the child and the artist. Dickens seems to imply that this quest must become a way of life not only for the artist, but for all men.

Looking at Bounderby in this light, we can see that he is the anti-artist and that his fable about his youth is anti-art. The artist is he who refuses to succumb to those who attempt to sever him from his childhood, and his art derives from the tension between his fidelity to the natural and joyous reality of childhood and the contemporary pressures threatening this reality. Bounderby, on the other hand, has attempted to kill his childhood by destroying all his links with it and, in doing so, has replaced it with a fiction that affirms rather than denies the existing order. Childhood and art are redemptive in so far as they refuse to conform to the reality principle; Bounderby's fictionalized past arises out of an adult mind wholly attuned to the values of an industrialized society and thus is a binding rather than a liberating force. What society wants Bounderby and every man to become and

what Bounderby envisions himself to be are inextricably merged. He is in this respect a perfect example of Marcuse's modern man who absorbs "societal authority" into his own conscience and unconscious until he believes he "lives his repression 'freely' as his own life."²⁰ But as Marcuse points out, this "freedom" is gained at a very high cost.

On one level, the cost levied against Bounderby is similar to that levied against Dickens' heroes who deny their past. Bounderby learns that the past invariably reveals itself, and that once revealed it destroys the fictional or illusory present. In Hard Times, the past is united to the present by Bounderby's mother, Mrs. Pegler, who, in keeping with the romance motif, comes across as a hybrid between an unwitting Fury and a more conventional English witch. "An old woman who seems to have been flying into town on a broomstick, every now and then" (II,viii, 141-42), Bounderby's mother revenges the crime of matricide, i.e., his refusal to acknowledge her existence, after having been thrust upon him by Mrs. Sparsit, the primary agent of Bounderby's nemesis. "The spectacle of a matron, [Mrs. Sparsit] of classical deportment, seizing an ancient woman [Mrs. Pegler] by the throat, and haling her in [Bounderby's] dwelling-house" attracts, in turn, an unruly chorus who

closed in after Mrs. Sparsit and her prize; and the whole body made a disorderly eruption into Mr. Bounderby's dining-room, where the people behind lost not a moment's time in mounting on the chairs, to get the better of the people in front (III,v,197).

In one of Hard Times' most brilliant dramatic strokes, Bounderby's public fable about his past is destroyed in a spectacle during which a privately concealed past is brought forth for public inspection.

Bounderby pays a greater price, however, than simply the loss of a falsely gained reputation. By creating a concept of self that corresponds to the industrial ethos around him, Bounderby is assimilated into that ethos. As a consequence, he becomes a projection of his own anti-fantasies, an embodiment of that aura of death he is helping to create. He is Dickens' modern figure of death, the opulent and corrupt bureaucrat imposing upon an outside world the death he carries within. Mrs. Sparsit, as astute as she is evil, seems to see this death within Bounderby: "There were occasions when in looking at him she was involuntarily moved to shake her head, as who would say, 'Alas poor Yorick!'" (II,viii,143). Bounderby's quest to make reality over in his own image results in his destruction of all that with which he comes into contact---Louisa, Tom Gradgrind, Blackpool, his other employees---everything and everyone he touches.

Louisa Gradgrind, the intended victim of Mrs. Sparsit's machinations, is Bounderby's antagonist throughout Hard Times, yet shares much in common with him. While Bounderby is a man-child who has killed his childhood by his

capitulation to the world of death around him, Louisa is a woman whose life has been broken by the absence of a childhood within it. Because she has never known those emotions of joy and wonder that create a connection between one's past and present, Louisa gazes into a fireplace only to discover the absence of that internal energy which makes growth possible. In front of a fireplace, Louisa resembles Bachelard's man engaged in reverie, "the man concerned with inner depths, a man in the process of development," and the man involved in "sexual reverie."²¹ She is, in other words, the artist concerned with the life-forces of imagination and sexuality. Her development, however, stops at an intellectual cognizance of her life's inadequacies, for her emotional life is destroyed by the absence of a childhood in the same way Bunderby's denial of his childhood destroys his.

Neither, as she approached her old home now, did any of the best influences of old home descend upon her. The dreams of childhood--its airy fables; its graceful, beautiful, humane, impossible adornments of the world beyond: so good to be believed in once, so good to be remembered when outgrown, for then the least among them rises to the stature of a great Charity in the heart, suffering little children to come into the midst of it, and to keep with their pure hands a garden in the stony ways of this world, ...simple and trustful, and not worldly-wise--what had she to do with these? (II, ix, 150-151).

The language of this passage is almost identical to Dickens' description of the powers of childhood in his "Frauds on the Fairies" and suggests the extent to

which Louisa Gradgrind embodies that fate Dickens saw in store for a world overrun by the "Whole Hog." She is the potential artist thwarted by a world inimical to imaginative powers, living proof of how the "closely imprisoned forces" of Eros rend and destroy. Bounderby is by no means exceptionally astute, but even he notes that "there are qualities in Louisa which--which have been harshly neglected and--and a little perverted"

(III,iii,183). Her passivity regarding her marriage to Bounderby, her dalliance with James Harthouse, the sexual overtones of her relationship with her brother, and her psychological and physical barrenness--all point toward the permanently damaging effects of Coketown upon an imaginative and sensitive person. Louisa Gradgrind is compassionate, wise, and loving; but the world in which she lives turns her compassion into a tool for evil, oppresses her wisdom in the name of reason, and first perverts her love and then renders it impotent.

Hard Times moves toward a world dominated by the forces of death. Within it, life exists precariously at best and is eventually either destroyed or made helpless. For this reason, Dickens chooses to keep the circus, the work's symbol of life, outside of Coketown's environs. John Holloway has noted that Dickens' "alternative [to Coketown] was something which

lay altogether outside the major realities of the social situation with which he dealt" and sees this as evidence, in part, that Hard Times "operated (for all its obvious common sense and its genuine value) at a relatively shallow level of consciousness."²² It is, however, precisely Dickens' recognition of the "major realities of the social situation" that requires him to find Coketown's only alternative in the circus. For Coketown is not a world in which the forces of life and death coexist dialectically, but one in which Thanatos has an uncontested reign; thus, given this monistic nature of Coketown, the circus must remain on the town's perimeters. It may send emissaries to it (Sissy Jupe) and it can proffer help if approached (Tom Gradgrind's escape), but, if it is to survive, it must remain apart.

The circus is an omnipresent contradiction and repudiation of Coketown. It is, as Bounderby describes it, "queer sort of company, too, for a man who has raised himself" (I,vi,24). He views it as a world of idleness and, in one respect, he is correct. It is a world of play, but play in the sense that Freud uses the term in speaking of the child and artist: it is a world rich in human experience, not because its citizens do not labor, but because their labor is nonrepressive and because their lives have remained faithful to the

natural instincts of joy and love. Consequently the circus people are artists in the psychological sense that they assert themselves against the outside world dominated by reason and the reality principle. They neither produce, dominate, nor master; and thus Bounderby, who regards them as subversive, intuitively aligns himself with the reality principle. About the circus people, Dickens writes, "There was a remarkable gentleness and childishness about these people, a special inaptitude for any kind of sharp practice" (I,vi,27). Marcuse, in speaking of Schiller's An Aesthetical Education of Man, describes "a genuinely humane civilization" as one in which "human existence will be play, rather than toil, and man will live in display rather than need."²³ What better symbol of such a humane world could Dickens have chosen? The circus people are children--artists by virtue of the life they lead--in their refusal to capitulate to Coketown's world and in their demand for a life of freedom and beauty.

In his essay on Dickens, Orwell observes that "even if Dickens was a bourgeois, he was certainly a subversive writer, a radical," not in his advocacy of change in the social structure, but in his advocacy of change of spirit.

His radicalism is of the vaguest kind,
and yet one always knows that it is

there...He has no constructive suggestions, not even a clear grasp of the nature of the society he is attacking, only an emotional perception that something is wrong.²⁴

But, as Orwell points out, such moral criticism can be every bit as revolutionary as political or economic criticism. In Hard Times, Dickens realizes that the problem is not the sickness of a particular society, but that society itself is a disease. On the one hand, there is the fairy flower garden, on the other, the Whole Hog whose raison d'etre is the destruction of the garden--there is no middle ground between them. There is the circus and there is Coketown: how does one reconcile the two? Looking carefully at the conclusion of Hard Times, we can see that Dickens seeks such a reconciliation. The elder Gradgrind undergoes a change of heart only to become "therefore much despised by his late political associates" (III, ix, 225). In Hard Times, individual benevolence seems to be invariably accompanied by political impotence. Only Sissy Jupe, of all the work's major characters, seems to survive intact, probably for the reason that she is more among the world of Coketown than of it. An emissary from the circus, she provides a force for good that counters Mrs. Sparsit's force for evil, but both Sissy and Mrs. Sparsit finally have only a limited effect upon

Coketown. Still, we read that Sissy is destined to bring children into this world and could regard this information as an optimistic note, as the inclusion of new life in an otherwise death-oriented world, were it not for the fact that when we anticipate the future lives of her children, we realize that the alternatives they will face as adults will still be Coketown on one hand and, hopefully, the circus on the other.

In yet another passage that appears toward the conclusion of Hard Times, Dickens again seems to depart momentarily from the nightmare vision of Coketown:

But, happy Sissy's happy children loving her [Louisa]; all children loving her; she, grown learned in childish love; thinking no innocent and pretty fancy ever to be despised; trying hard to know her humbler fellow-creatures and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy will wither up, the sturdiest physical manhood will be morally stark death, and the plainest national prosperity figures can show will be the Writing on the Wall,--- she holding this course as part of no fantastic vow, or bond, or brotherhood, or sisterhood, or pledge or covenant, or fancy dress, or fancy fair; but simply as a duty to be done (III, ix, 226-27).

However, this passage, too, contains evidence of the tensions which run throughout Hard Times. On one hand, we see Dickens hoping to humanize an inhumane system without changing the system itself and, in doing so, creating such mythical forces of social changes as the labor union into dark and diabolical organizations.

In this respect, the passage is common middle-class fare and would have been acceptable to the staunchest defender of nineteenth-century capitalism.

But, on the other hand, Dickens finally expresses in unambiguous terms what previously the opposition between the circus and Coketown has demonstrated symbolically: the forces of life are specifically located within the domain of art (those "imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy will wither up, the sturdiest physical manhood will be morally stark death"), and the forces of death within civilization and reality ("their lives of machinery and reality"). In the usual sense, this is not a resolution, but merely another acknowledgment of the same problem we have seen in Dickens' refusal to bring the circus and Coketown together.

It is not surprising that Dickens has been criticized for failing to present a more meaningful solution. He moves through the fallen world of Hard Times only to arrive at what appears to be little more than the creation of a fairy godmother whose capacity for working miracles is extremely limited. But such a conclusion is not so simplistic as it seems, for what Dickens confronts is a dialectic between the moralist and the revolutionary (the former asserting that the social system cannot change until human nature changes, the latter denying that human

nature can improve within a corrupt social system), but it is also the dialectic between Eros and Thanatos, between man's desire to live and his desire to die. At the conclusion of his Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud can only express the vague hope that Eros will somehow manage to assert itself against its immortal foe. Similarly, the conclusion of Hard Times will fail to satisfy us if we expect Dickens to turn for answers to where he has already looked, but found only emptiness.

Dickens cannot very well look to "machinery [either social or technological] and reality" for an answer--he has already identified them as the forces of death. The power they represent is finally impotent because the overwhelming problem facing man is one of a psychic rather than a social disorder. Since Coketown is but the manifestation of a collective psychic disorientation, any social restructuring can at best treat only the symptoms, not the cause, of society's sickness. It is possible that Dickens, by setting the circus on Coketown's perimeters, intended eventually to bring the two worlds together. Sissy Jupe's early entrance into Coketown seems to provide such a potential link; but when Hard Times ends, the circus and Coketown are as distant from one another as they were when it began. The circus remains an anarchic force, as evidenced by

its final role in helping the younger Gradgrind to escape; and Coketown, on the other hand, remains secure, having successfully removed or isolated all potential threats to it.

However middle class Dickens may have been and however many of its attitudes he might have shared, he also possessed that inexplicable greatness which I have chosen to call by the name of genius, and in the case of Hard Times, this genius drove Dickens beyond the limits he probably envisioned. Dickens as artist, in Plato's terms, dreams while awake; and what his dreams reveal, the fully awakened and nondreamer part of Dickens need not even fully understand or agree with. What ultimately matters is Hard Times itself. And it is, I think a great work not in spite of, but because of its unevenness. For its unevenness arises from a conflict within Dickens himself and thus makes us spectators to the drama of artistic creation as well as to the drama that unfolds within Hard Times' fictional world. Hard Times is a work of two voices: of the voice that wanted to keep Stephen Blackpool alive and of the stronger voice that realized that Stephen had to die; and these two voices are throughout in varying degrees of discord with one another.

FOOTNOTES

¹David M. Hirsch, "Hard Times and Dr. Leavis," Criticism 6 (Winter 1964), p. 2.

²John Holloway, "Hard Times: A History and A Criticism" in Dickens and the Twentieth Century, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 168.

³Hirsch, p. 16.

⁴Monroe Engel, The Maturity of Dickens (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 172-175.

⁵Raymond Williams, Culture and Society: 1780-1950 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 99-104.

⁶Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 304, hereafter referred to as AC.

⁷Ibid., pp. 304-5.

⁸Charles Dickens, "Frauds on the Fairies," Household Words, VIII, p. 97. Reprinted in Uncollected Writings from Household Words, Harry Stone, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. iii.

⁹Charles Dickens, Hard Times. All references to Hard Times are to the Norton Critical Edition, ed. George and Sylvere Monod (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), hereafter referred to as HT. In order to facilitate the use of the other editions, book, chapter, and page numbers have been cited.

¹⁰"Frauds on the Fairies," p. 97.

¹¹Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 155.

¹²Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 103.

¹³George Bernard Shaw, "Introduction to Hard Times," in Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), p. 332.

¹⁴John Ruskin, Unto This Last, rev. ed. Lloyd J. Hubenka, ed. (Lincoln, Nebraska: Nebraska University Press, 1967), p. 31.

¹⁵Charles Dickens, "Letter to John Forster" (July 14, 1854), cited by Ford and Monod in Norton Critical Edition, p. 277.

¹⁶AC, p. 238.

¹⁷William Empson, Some Versions of Pastoral (New York: Directions, 1960), p. 19.

¹⁸AC, p. 304.

¹⁹Gaston Bachelard, The Psychoanalysis of Fire, trans. C. M. Ross (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 51.

²⁰Marcuse, p. 42.

²¹Ibid., p. 56.

²²Holloway, p. 167.

²³Marcuse, p. 171.

²⁴George Orwell, A Collection of Essays (New York: Doubleday, 1954), p. 108.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS CITED

- Bachelard, Gaston. The Psychoanalysis of Fire. trans. C. M. Ross. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.
- Dickens, Charles. "Frauds on the Fairies," rpt. in Uncollected Writings from Household Words. Harry Stone, ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968. pp. 97-100.
- _____. Hard Times. rpt. in Norton Critical Edition, George and Sylvere Monod, eds. New York: W. W. Norton, 1966.
- _____. "Letter to John Forster" (July 14, 1854), cited by Ford and Monod in Norton Critical Edition, p. 277.
- Empson, William. Some Versions of Pastoral. New York: New Directions, 1960.
- Engel, Monroe. The Maturity of Dickens. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1959.
- Freud, Sigmund. Civilization and Its Discontents. New York: W. W. Norton, 1961.
- Frye, Northrop. Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.
- Hirsch, David M. "Hard Times and Dr. Leavis," Criticism 6 Winter 1964, pp. 1-16.
- Holloway, John. "Hard Times: A History and A Criticism" in Dickens and the Twentieth Century. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson, eds. pp. 159-174.
- Marcuse, Herbert. Eros and Civilization. New York: Random House, 1961.
- Orwell, George. A Collection of Essays. New York: Doubleday, 1954.
- Ruskin, John. Unto The Last. rev. ed. Lloyd J. Hubenka, ed. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1967.
- Shaw, George Bernard. "Introduction to Hard Times," rpt. in the Norton Critical Edition. George and Sylvere Monod, eds. New York: W. W. Norton, 1966. pp. 332-339.
- Williams, Raymond. Culture and Society: 1780-1950. New York: Columbia University Press, 1958.